

ILA Tops Scrap Powerful Strike

Longshore Workers: Prepare for Next Battle

“No contract, no work!” rang out up and down the Atlantic and Gulf Coast seaboard when the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) went out on strike October 1. But less than three days in, ILA president Harold Daggett called off the strike and extended the old contract. Workers celebrated an announced 62 percent pay increase, only to learn the next day that the increase is not immediate but rather depends on reaching a new contract with the USMX bosses by January 15. While the wage offer is sizable, even this is not enough. The tentative wage package doesn’t mention raises for newly hired workers, who make only \$20 an hour. The key issues of pensions, healthcare, wage tiers and job losses through automation are all unresolved.

ILA leaders are claiming victory while patting themselves on the back for delaying the wage increase and thereby preserving the union’s right to strike during contract negotiations. But this begs the question: Why pull the plug on the strike in the first place? Every striker on that picket line knew that they had immense power, and every worker knows that timing is everything. Daggett and local ILA officials at every port succeeded only in throwing away the leverage that the union had in halting the supply chain at a crucial time—right before the elections and peak shipping for the holiday season. The way that longshoremen were hustled back to work was in fact designed to discourage them from striking again, since doing so risks losing the wage offer being dangled before them. Many workers who militantly defended the picket line yesterday are scratching their heads in confusion and anger today, wondering what it was all for.

But the battle is not over. Union militants can begin now to put the ILA in a better position to unleash the collective action needed to win their demands. But to do so requires drawing the lessons of what happened in order to figure out how to proceed.

ILA Partnership with Bosses and Their Politicians Hinders Union Struggle

Why did the same leadership that set the strike in motion simultaneously sabotage it? On the one hand, the ILA tops had to deliver some kind of results to the ranks. In an industry at the center of the U.S. economy, this requires confrontation with the ruling class. On the other hand, their underlying commitment to the status quo where the bosses call the shots means the ILA leaders do not want to cause a crisis for the U.S. rulers.

They never were going to wage the strike as an intransigent fight for what workers need against the bosses and their government.

Daggett’s strategy could only lead to capitulation because it relies on a partnership with the bosses and their politicians. While workers displayed a desire to fight for relief from staggering prices and job insecurity, the ILA leadership has done everything to restrain those impulses and keep them within the bounds considered safe by the establishment. While they have to produce results to not lose control over the ranks, the union tops are loyal to the ruling class, which has bestowed privileges on them in return for their service.

The strike was a calculated move by Daggett to allow workers to blow off a little steam, and so he cut it off before it took on a life of its own. His plans were orchestrated with the White House so that the Democrats came out smelling like roses. Afterwards, he even wrote Biden to praise the administration for its help. The Democrats didn’t have to invoke Taft-Hartley—Harold Daggett did it for them by taking down the picket lines and voluntarily imposing a three-month “cooling off” period. USMX got what it wanted: longshoremen off the picket lines, the supply chain back



WV Photo

Port of Savannah, October 1. ILA ranks’ determination to fight for what they need was undermined by ILA leadership’s refusal to cause a crisis for U.S. rulers.

up and running and labor peace until mid-January after peak season and the elections.

“National Unity” Blackmail Shackles the ILA

When longshore workers went out on strike and disrupted the supply chain, it put them in direct confrontation with this country’s ruling class. But Daggett told longshoremen that the battle was only with the foreign-owned shipping companies. Let’s get real—USMX and its affiliates like Maersk are overseen by the U.S. rulers, who are in charge overall at the ports. That’s why White House officials like Labor Secretary Julie Su intervened—so things didn’t get out of hand. It is why Florida’s Republican governor, Ron DeSantis, called out the National Guard to break the strike if Daggett didn’t halt it.

On its eve, Daggett undermined the strike by claiming that ILA means “I Love America” and vowing to keep military cargo flowing. This pledge was a declaration of love to America’s ruling elite, who squeeze working people at home and fuel wars and genocide abroad. Workers here—whose kids will pay with their lives for these wars—have no interest in supporting the government’s military operations. The ILA Facebook page reposted a video stating that ILA workers and Palestinians have a common enemy in Maersk. Longshoremen not handling military cargo would do far more to help the Palestinians than any video reposted by the ILA’s PR team—and would go a long way toward putting the union on top in its battle with USMX.

Some ILA workers believe that the reason Daggett capitulated was the *New York Post*’s hit job against him for bringing workers out. Its purpose was to turn public opinion against the strike, painting ILA members who face harsh working conditions on the job upwards of 100 hours a week as ungrateful and greedy. The truth is, workers already know who parks the Bentleys in the employee lot. They also know who has a camper in the lot because they are at the bosses’ beck and call and have to sleep onsite, instead of at home with their families.

Segregation Holds Back the ILA

The U.S. ruling class preserves its profits and power by pitting white workers against black workers. In service to the bosses and their government, the ILA bureaucracy enforces their “divide and rule” schemes and oversees racial, craft and tier divisions among workers at the ports. In Newark, there are separate locals of longshore workers, one predominantly white and the other predominantly black. There are only a small number of black workers among the well-paid checkers and mechanics, who are organized into separate, largely white, locals.

After decades of being told this segregated setup is “the best we’re gonna get,” many workers, especially black workers, can’t imagine the ILA being run any other way. In Newark, a large number of black workers fear that they will lose job security in a merged local. They see that “integrated” ILA locals in the area are much whiter than the Newark piers under the ILA’s segregated structure.

In the southern ports, where there are few white union longshoremen, segregation is no less a problem, only it takes the form of segregation by tier and craft. To alibi their own role in maintaining these union fault lines, black local ILA bureaucrats blame all problems on Daggett and “right to work” state governments. Among other things, though, they refuse to wage the necessary struggle to bring white nonunion port workers into the

ILA, handing the bosses a club to drive down work conditions and a labor pool to be mobilized against the union. Similarly, separate local contracts pit dockers at one port against those at another, fueling a downward spiral. For example, in the rich oil port of Houston, ILA longshoremen have no pension whatsoever.

To break down its divisions and maximize its fighting capacity, the ILA needs to fuse its segregated locals. This must be done in a way that prevents any attempt to force black workers to the bottom of a combined local. What is necessary is *more* decent paying union jobs for both black and white workers and integrated union-run, company-paid job training and upgrading programs, so that the gains for one group of workers will not come at another’s expense. *For a six-hour day with 12 hours pay for all in the North and South! Top pay and benefits for new hires!*

The fight for these demands would also transform the locals that are formally integrated right now, crucially by throwing open the door of the union and actively recruiting black workers into all crafts while allowing workers of all races to carry their seniority to easier jobs. In every port, there should be one union local that includes longshore and warehouse workers, mechanics and checkers. Making this perspective a reality demands the kind of political struggle against the ILA bureaucracy needed to cohere a new, class-struggle leadership of the union.

The point is to make the union *stronger*. The ILA is increasingly an island in an ocean of nonunion labor. Port truckers who demonstrated their solidarity with the ILA during the strike are overwhelmingly nonunion. The way to help port truckers is not by servicing them faster on the job, as the ILA tops propose, but by helping them organize and get paid by the hour. Speedup only makes the bosses richer and more workers jobless, while eroding safety for truckers and longshoremen alike.

Hundreds of thousands of black, white and Latino warehouse workers who stuff and strip containers are nonunion. In the ports, janitors, secretaries, computer techs and cafeteria workers are also unorganized. The ILA should take leadership in assisting all these workers to unionize.

The ILA must prepare now for the next battle. What is urgently posed is redoubling efforts to bridge the union’s divisions through integration of the locals and crafts and to strengthen the ILA based on a strategy that benefits all its members:

- **Top rate and benefits for all ILA members. Equal pay for equal work. Eliminate tiers. Six hours work at 12 hours pay for everyone!**
- **Organize joint local meetings to undercut racial, craft and pier divisions. Build interracial class-struggle strike committees for next January. Fuse the locals at every port!**
- **Organize port truckers and all unorganized workers!**
- **Dump the Democrats and Republicans, for a class-struggle workers party!**

Read *Workers Vanguard*, Marxist newspaper of the Central Committee of the SL/U.S.: workersvanguard.org

Spartacist League/U.S., section of the International Communist League (Fourth Internationalist)

Box 1377 GPO, New York, NY 10116 • (212) 732-7860 • icli.org • vanguard@tiac.net • [@WorkersVanguard](https://x.com/WorkersVanguard)

Chicago: (312) 563-0441
chicagospartacist@sbcglobal.net

Los Angeles: (213) 380-8239
slsycla@sbcglobal.net

New York: (212) 267-1025
nysl@tiac.net

Oakland: (510) 839-0851
slbayarea@fastmail.net